

## From shouting to counting : civil society and good governance reform in Cambodia

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DOI:

[10.1080/09512748.2014.882393](https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2014.882393)

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Norman, DJ 2014, 'From shouting to counting : civil society and good governance reform in Cambodia', *Pacific Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 241-264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2014.882393>

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## The Pacific Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpre20>

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Published online: 18 Feb 2014.



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To cite this article: David J. Norman (2014) From shouting to counting: civil society and good governance reform in Cambodia, *The Pacific Review*, 27:2, 241-264, DOI: [10.1080/09512748.2014.882393](https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2014.882393)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2014.882393>

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# From shouting to counting: civil society and good governance reform in Cambodia

*David J. Norman*

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**Abstract** This article explores the emergence of new spaces for civil society organisations (CSOs) as a result of an increasing interest by international donors in multi-stakeholder approaches to good governance under the ‘new policy agenda’. Drawing upon a contemporary case study of civil society in Cambodia, it argues that CSOs have been encouraged to perform two key roles on a national level: professional service delivery agents and democratic watchdogs. Both roles are seen by donors as integral to supporting an accountable and professional model of the Cambodian state while drawing upon valuable private sector lessons in a synergetic model of governance. The result is the construction of particular neoliberal spaces for CSOs operating as technical implementation mechanisms in response to externally driven donor pressures. Furthermore, under this new framework of governance, CSOs face pressure to undergo internal transformation akin to new public management reform; embracing economic and administrative modes of coordination as core values of civil society participation.

**Key words:** Cambodia; good governance; international development; civil society; neoliberalism.

The elevation of civil society from the margins to the mainstream of international development orthodoxy over the last few decades, has coincided with a broader critical discussion amongst an increasing number of civil society organisations (CSOs) concerned about being incorporated into a development paradigm seen as antithetical to their interests. CSOs had previously championed issues such as participation, empowerment and democracy in critique of what they perceived as an exclusionary neoliberal development project increasingly dislocated from local voices. In response, orthodox developmental policy shifted towards a broader stakeholder approach increasing the spheres of influence for CSOs, while

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invoking the same language of participation, empowerment and democracy as integral to development strategies. In what became known as the 'new policy agenda', international donors prioritised the three pillars of democracy, human rights and good governance as key conditionalities for aid, while drawing upon the extensive experience of CSOs to help implement their reform projects. Promoting a model of synergism between the state, market and civil society, contemporary discourse has, however, converged around a set of ideals that is increasingly being described as a perverse confluence (Dagnino 2007) by sceptics; the co-option of civil society under a broader neoliberal umbrella that utilises the same language of pluralised participatory democracy, while re-inscribing development orthodoxy (Cornwall and Brock 2005). Under the new policy agenda, CSOs have become an integral cog in contemporary neoliberal donor strategies tasked with streamlining the market into developing states. Underpinning this agenda is a commitment to the reform of a developing state's economic and political architecture; economically through expanding the role of CSOs as efficient service providers, and politically through using CSOs to hold the state accountable as democratic watchdogs, under an increasing commitment to a particular donor image of *good governance*<sup>1</sup> as the driving force of the new policy agenda (Edwards and Hulme 1996a).

This article will draw upon a contemporary case study of Cambodia where in the last two decades various donors have attempted to 're-build' civil society in the wake of the appalling legacy of the Khmer Rouge, and increasingly link CSOs to good governance reform as a key priority for the reconstruction of the quasi-democratic Cambodian state.<sup>2</sup> In particular it will highlight how under this reform project a particular model of civil society is being cultivated, linked to neoliberal modes of governance as a technical/managerial sphere tasked with streamlining market mechanisms into an ideal type liberal democratic state. In this respect the article contributes to a growing literature that has critically engaged with civil society's co-option under neoliberal frameworks more broadly (see Alvarez 1999; Schild 2002; Townsend et al. 2002; Jad 2004; Kamat 2004) and the effects of 'hybridisation'; the interweaving of neoliberal norms into everyday spaces (McCarthy 2005; England and Ward 2007).

Cambodian CSOs within this development ideal are encouraged to embody the same logics that drive state and market actors; what Habermas would label *systemic* logics of coordination.<sup>3</sup> Central to these logics of coordination is the notion of administrative power; a specific technical form of rationality that is associated with efficiency and productivity, linked to state power as a mode of steering that attempts to 'assemble, distribute, evaluate, and organise' (Adorno 2001: 107). In order to trace these links, the article will investigate the transformative key roles for CSOs that are seen as central to the new policy agenda within the country; *service providers* and *democratic watchdogs*, and highlight how through the driving

force of good governance they are both encouraged to embody this particular neoliberal identity.

### **Good governance and the new policy agenda: mainstreaming civil society**

The origins of the good governance framework stem from the IMF and World Bank's reactions to failing Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the late 1980s, where blame was placed squarely on authoritarian and quasi-democratic governments for corrupt, inefficient and inflexible bureaucracies distorting economic performance (IMF/World Bank 1989). In 1989 the Bank released its landmark report; *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, implicitly invoking the need for a more democratic state that could successfully nurture private sector-led economic growth (World Bank 1989). In the same year, the influential Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), began to recognise the existence of a 'vital connection between open, democratic and accountable political systems, individual rights and the effective and equitable operation of economic systems' (DAC 1997). With the ending of the Cold War, a new paradigm began to emerge with the export of liberal democratic political systems and private sector market principles to developing countries; focusing heavily on state bureaucratic reform and good governance to ensure success (Robinson 1993; Edwards and Hulme 1996b; Crawford 2001)

In its early format, the good governance agenda, tended to focus heavily on promoting an efficient, professional and accountable state public administration in an attempt to provide an enabling environment for private sector led growth (see Nelson and Eglinton 1992; Leftwich 1993). These reforms emanated from the increasingly popular ideas of new public management; a form of public sector management synonymous with the idea of an 'entrepreneurial government' that introduces a more private sector oriented approach with its preference for quality, productivity, market-style incentives and performance management (Lynn 2006). New public management as a managerial philosophy was exported as best practice; reforms were implemented globally within public administrations throughout the world (see Kirkpatrick et al. 2005; Sarker 2009)

Throughout the 1990s, the good governance agenda began to evolve from a narrow state-centric approach to development, towards a broader multi-stakeholder approach led by the World Bank and its development partners. These institutions began to acknowledge the importance of community involvement in development projects where wider participation was now seen as 'intrinsic to good governance' (World Bank 1994: 42). Public involvement in policy design and project implementation was considered paramount as it could 'improve information flow, accountability,

due process, and voice' (World Bank 1994:43). This new participatory approach still clearly retained a core emphasis on the need for an accountable and professional public sector; however, there was a new focus on forging closer partnerships with non-state actors, particularly from civil society, in order to support bureaucratic reform (Lewis 2010).

A variety of bilateral and multilateral donors began to take a keen interest in how civil society could actively support good governance reform, and so began to focus on two key roles; *professional service provision* and *democratic oversight*, both of which were seen as key to the overall success of the new policy agenda to 'enable choice, scrutinise errant governments, and ultimately lead to regularised, plural democracy' (Mohan 2002: 125; Edwards and Hulme 1996c; Carothers and Ottaway 2000).

The first role describes the long established legacy of NGOs<sup>4</sup> as supplementary service providers in developing countries, however, under the broadening of the good governance framework they have been elevated to the forefront of service provision 'in deliberate substitution for the state' (Edwards and Hulme 1996c: 2). Structural adjustment and new public management reform of state bureaucracies led to a large-scale contracting out of service provision including the decentralisation of welfare to the private sector. NGOs that already held vast experience in small-scale service provision were regarded by donors as an important funding antidote to state based welfare; the consequence of which was a rapid increase in their numbers as they became incorporated within this decentralised welfare system as a short-term 'magic bullet' (Vivian 1994). The World Bank in particular, regarded NGOs as cheap, effective and more viable alternatives to the overly bureaucratic public sector, reaching the most vulnerable and inaccessible groups of beneficiaries more effectively than government counterparts (World Bank 1990).

The increase in funding and spaces available for NGOs created a development marketplace within the service provision industry and resulted in an increased effort on the behalf of donors to improve the efficiency and structures of NGOs to ensure that they could fulfil these roles in the absence of the state. Donors sought to make NGOs more 'accountable' as a fundamental criterion within funding initiatives, through the infusing of new public management strategies directly into their frameworks to create a 'professional' form of NGO that could implement donor projects more smoothly (Dichter 1999; Silliman 1999). Accountability within this context has been narrowly interpreted to link closely with new public management through accountancy, evaluation and audit procedures in an attempt to ensure NGOs are responsible for the funds that are channelled through them (Frumkin and Andre-Clark 2000; Dixon et al. 2006). As a consequence a culture of audit appears, where NGO's actively attempt to appear 'fundable' to their donors, often instilling projects that can be quantitatively measured, monitored and evaluated in order to have the best chances of demonstrating success (Guthman 2008).

This shift towards a more accountable and professional NGO has resulted in a form of decentralised neoliberalism reinforcing a particular model of managerialism and economic rationality at the heart of these organisations (Cooke 2004; Fyfe 2005). This can have the effect of creating an increasing gulf between this corporatist model of NGO that prioritises vertical conceptions of accountability through professional performance audit mechanisms, and more informal organisations that concentrate on accountability through community input (Dagnino 2007). Ultimately, as a consequence of scaling up under a donor-based system that ideologically reinforces neoliberal governance norms, the latter informal model of NGO is marginalised through a competitive market sector that is more concerned with project output rather than community input (Fowler 2000: 14).

The second role under the new policy agenda incorporates civil society as a democratic oversight mechanism, in order to hold a developing state accountable. NGOs are incorporated here alongside other forms of community based organisations (CBOs) into local governance frameworks in order to tackle corruption and demand accountability from government actors. The shift to a broader interpretation of good governance led the DAC in 1993 to approve a working party on Participatory Development and Good Governance (PDGG) drawing on two central tenets of this broader approach: strengthening civil society to negotiate with government bureaucracies to provide a check on government power, and the direct involvement of communities to enhance more efficient and sustainable development programmes (OECD 1995).

Demanding accountability of the state has become a core development goal, where civil society is encouraged to strengthen 'the demand for reform, promoting and monitoring transparency and accountability in the fight against corruption' (DCD/DAC 2006). After the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) the DAC released a list of key principles to guide donors as best practice in the fight against corruption, arguing that they should coordinate: '...with local and international civil society and private sector actors as the primary alternative, but recognising that strengthening government commitment is the essential objective in the long term' (DCD/DAC 2006: 4).

Clearly the need to strengthen civil society is seen here not as an end itself, but in the instrumental services of an anti-corruption agenda; integral to the donor perception of a liberal democratic state. The World Bank calls this 'Social Accountability' and it involves organising CSOs into frameworks designed to hold the state to account, while stimulating local citizen demand for this accountability; integral to what the World Bank describes as the demand side of good governance (Malena et al. 2005).

There are generally five areas that are targeted by donors as the functional domains of social accountability: (1) budgets (2) public policy making and planning, (3) public goods and services, (4) expenditures, (5)



public oversight and monitoring (Sirker and Cosic 2007). In order to improve accountability within these areas, various tools have been implemented by CSOs for citizen and community participation including for example, citizen report cards, community score cards, citizen ombudsmen offices, citizens' oversight committees, participatory budgeting, social audits, and participatory performance monitoring. In a similar vein to the previous discussion on the permeation of neoliberal forms of governance into service provision, social accountability tools can sometimes require the construction of a specific technical/professional form of civil society and can potentially lead to a prioritising of particular organisational practice. Increasingly popular citizen report cards and community score cards are often modelled on private sector practice, involving performance monitoring of client satisfaction, including the quality, efficiency and adequacy of public service provision. They can be seen as a surrogate for competition for institutions that lack the same levels of responsiveness found within the private sector when enterprises respond to a client's needs, therefore they offer a 'comparative and competitive dynamic similar to that imposed by the market' (Ackerman 2005: 14). In order for them to be successfully implemented they are linked by donors with the more technical minded NGOs that can serve as intermediaries between demanding citizens and the accountable state (Ravindra 2004).

These Social Accountability tools first rely upon a specific type of CSO to design and enforce the projects; the professional model, and second construct spaces for citizens collectively working within informal groups, associations and committees as a form of civil society that links advocacy to the neutral and instrumental form of democratic participation. The World Bank summarises this most succinctly with its 2004 report *From Shouting to Counting: A New Frontier in Social Development* where: 'It's not just about people protesting and making noise. This new approach to citizen action actually involves systematic analysis and intelligent use of data, making sure their governments spend effectively and keep their promises' (World Bank 2004a).

These roles are designed to create the ideal model of a decentralised liberal democracy that is responsive to the demands of its citizens. The shift towards promoting democratic decentralisation contains a *supply* side transformation of public administration including improving service delivery, and a *demand* side that places an emphasis upon civil society as a pressure point to demand accountability from the state.

In order to highlight this increasing permeation of neoliberal forms of governance under the New Policy Agenda, the article will now turn to an analysis of international donor intervention in the country of Cambodia since the early 1990s, where civil society has emerged as a powerful actor in the country's development. The permeation of neoliberal policies through good governance frameworks, have created new spaces for civil society in Cambodia, though these spaces of inclusion are deeply exclusive

through the construction of a singular universal model of the professional, competitive, and efficient CSO.

### **Cambodia encounters the new policy agenda: Donor harmonisation and the good governance framework**

Following the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords,<sup>5</sup> the donor community<sup>6</sup> convened the Ministerial Conference on the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Cambodia (MCRC), leading in 1992 to the establishment of the International Committee for the Rehabilitation of Cambodia (ICORC). The arrival in 1992 of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) created a level of stability that had been absent in the country for decades, and heralded an unprecedented increase in the numbers of international NGOs arriving in the country.

Newly arriving International NGOs documented a nation-wide breakdown in societal trust, cooperation and communal bonds as a consequence of the Khmer Rouge era (Barton 2001: 12). In response the donor community began to heavily promote the emergence and growth of civil society; perceiving the country as a 'blank slate'<sup>7</sup> and a unique opportunity to carry out their various development projects (Hughes 2003: 138).

Although international donor governments had initially envisaged the vast numbers of international NGOs arriving as a conduit for emergency relief and aid, while keeping the unstable Cambodian state at arm's length; problems of corruption had manifested itself within the new political regime (Curtis 1998: 74). In recognising these problems donors shifted away from providing aid as emergency relief, towards the full 'rehabilitation and the development of the physical, social and political infrastructure of the country' (Grube 1998: 3). As a consequence, the international donor community established the Cambodian Consultative Group in 1996, to discuss key development priorities and coordinate work with the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) and ensure donor priorities were carried out by the state. Despite attempts to integrate a strong free market economy within the country through structural adjustment, violence and political instability in 1997 shifted donor priorities away from simple macro-economic reform towards a stronger emphasis on 'strengthening the rule of governance, and tackling corruption' (IMF 1999).

In 2004, the Cambodian Consultative Group released a statement declaring the twin priorities of combating corruption and increasing accountability as paramount for the development of the country. USAID for example, established these priorities as primary goals alongside health and education, arguing that the integration of good governance principles were essential to 'determine whether Cambodia succeeds or fails as a country' (USAID 2006: 1).

At the same time, the RGC released its critical 2004 Rectangular Strategy, drawing upon key elements from the Millennium Development Goals,

the Cambodia Socio-Economic Development Program 2001–2005 (SEDPII) and Cambodia's National Poverty Reduction Strategy 2003–2005 (NRPS) to create a framework that officially places *good governance* as the 'cornerstone' of Cambodia's development (Hun 2004: 6). This theme features prominently in the latest National Strategic Development Plan 2009–2013, and in the updated 2008 Rectangular Strategy (Phase II) where good governance is seen as 'the most important prerequisite to ensure socio-economic development' (RGC 2008b).

Cambodia's bureaucratic system was decimated following the brutal Khmer Rouge regime and as a result accountability practices have been slow to take root. A World Bank report in 2004 detailed the need to encourage a new accountable structure that would transform bureaucratic service provision; internal systems of audits, evaluations and monitoring mechanisms that can act as a system of checks and balances to combat corruption and poor service delivery (World Bank 2004b: 7). In order to implement good governance reform, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) outlined the importance of public administration reform in order to make the sector 'neutral, transparent, professional, responsive and responsible' (Hun 2004: 8). A broad package of administrative reforms was outlined to strengthen the rule of law, enhance civil service management and importantly; establish good governance within service provision (RGC 2006).

Despite initiating a wealth of good governance reforms requested by the donor community, the RGC in practice still tends to offer only lukewarm support, and only championed when external international support has been needed (Un and Hughes 2011:200). For example, the RGC since 2010 continues to delay the release of a draft budget law into the public domain, as well as a long overdue 'Access to Information Law' despite pressure from donors and international NGOs for full disclosure of public information (NGO Forum 2012). An online 2006 national audit report was recently withdrawn from public access further compounding donor frustrations at this seemingly antithetical stance towards good governance.

As a result, donors are increasingly focusing on the second aspect of accountability seen as integral to improving good governance; the need for citizens, as a force within civil society, to monitor and hold to account the RGC through the enhancement of social accountability.

These two elements of accountability are crucial to the framework of this case study and link explicitly with the previous discussion of the role of civil society under the new policy agenda. First, donors have emphasized the crucial need for an accountable and efficient transformation of *service provision* in the country; what is often neglected is that this service provision is increasingly undertaken by NGOs who are now under pressure to incorporate new public management-style frameworks directly into their governance structures. Second, NGOs have been invoked as *oversight monitors* tasked with constructing an enabling environment for citizens to exact accountability from these service providers and the state more generally. Both roles have created new spaces for civil society to expand influence and

voice, however, the fulfilment of donor demands results in the formation of a technical/professional neoliberal ideal-type with the potential to displace and marginalize other civil society actors. This article will now discuss the two different roles that are being undertaken within the country.

### **The new policy agenda: service provision and civil society in Phnom Penh**

The elevation of NGOs into the role of public service providers resulted in a development marketplace where donors were faced with an immeasurable number of new NGOs forming and submitting funding requests, leaving donors the opportunity to select preferred candidates dependent upon set criteria. NGOs became effective sub-contractors to a new competitive aid market while government counterpart organisations severely lacked the skilled personnel to cope with the influx of funding and projects. This resulted at first in the rise of a multitude of Come-and-go NGOs (ComeN'GOs) that were specifically targeting donor funding for entrepreneurial motivations, often disbanding once projects had expired (Curtis 1998; Houm 1999).

In order to compete in a difficult funding market, NGOs have had to adapt their internal structures in order to appear fundable and accountable. Many began to establish standards of best practice in response to donors' renewed interest in good governance reform, and although all are competing for the rights to provide services, they have had to focus on 'clearly defined output expectations, tight monitoring and evaluation against key performance indicators' (Kimchoeun et al. 2007: 10). The government is currently creating Special Operating Agencies (SOAs), which are sub-level ministries that receive donor and state funding for contracting out service provision to NGOs and the private sector (RGC 2008). These ministries will award Service Delivery Grants (SDGs) and Management Contracts (MCs) to capable NGOs that operate on the principles of good governance, transparency, accountability and efficiency (World Bank 2008a).

NGOs are therefore attempting to develop and display proof to donors of adaptation to increasingly professional good governance internal mechanisms, an example of which is a new project underway in Phnom Penh; the *NGO Governance and Professional Project* (NGO-GPP)<sup>8</sup> to create an accreditation process that can help to single out those NGOs that display an adherence to good governance principles.

In the last decade the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) argued that it was integral for NGOs to appear as accountable and transparent as they could in order to have the best chance of attracting donor money for their projects; not appearing to be interested in good governance would make it extremely difficult to operate in Cambodia (Interview 2007a). In 2004 it created the NGO-GPP with the intention of encouraging and promoting NGO accountability and good organisational practice in

the country. The first stage of the NGO-GPP project was to create a minimum set of standards and ethical principles that would structure NGOs into being more accountable and fundable to donors and included ensuring that NGOs have a clearly defined mission statement, a commitment to internal governance mechanisms that promote accountability and transparency, and a regular procedure for monitoring and evaluating staff and management. Interestingly the shift towards a more professional approach includes, having an annual global financial audit, financial management systems and annual performance appraisals (NGO-GPP 2007).

This has been reflected in an updated NGO-GPP programme that demonstrates the shift towards a more professionalised approach that NGOs should follow in order to be certified as practitioners of good governance through increased self-regulation mechanisms. The NGO-GPP training course offers daily topics on 'organisational policies and board development', 'effective human resource management', 'administrative and financial management', 'monitoring and evaluation' and 'organisational and strategic planning' (CCC 2009). The NGO-GPP provides the newly emerging professional NGO sector in Phnom Penh with a certificate that signals to donors the suitability of an NGO for funding considerations.

There is new evidence emerging within the sector that key international donors are starting to incorporate the NGO-GPP certification within their funding preferences (CCC 2010) and that even the government is starting to take notice of its importance to increased aid harmonisation.<sup>9</sup> This of course reflects the increasing trend globally for self-regulatory systems as a method to attract donor funding. Donors are showing clear preferences for 'putting more emphasis on metrics to measure outcomes which require NGOs to improve knowledge management and demonstrate accountability through subjecting themselves to benchmarking against sector standards and codes of conduct' (Lingan and Hammer 2011: 5).

Many NGOs in Cambodia now hire business staff in order to understand and facilitate the administrative demands required of them by donors. Often smaller NGOs feel pressurised into establishing a board of directors, management and financial committees as well as recruiting new personnel specifically trained in private sector techniques to help carry out project funding requests, audits and general administration (Interview 2007c).

Most NGOs have turned towards auditing as a standard method to remain accountable and fundable; many in Phnom Penh are now externally audited and must provide adequate financial disclosure and administrative reporting as demanded by donors. Accountability embedded in new public management (NPM) private sector notions of incentives and sanctions, results in NGO managers having to reach certain performance requirements that can be measured quantifiably (Kimchoeun et al. 2007: 10). It is not uncommon to find an increasingly large number of NGOs linked to Western audit firms such as Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC), and intensifies the increasingly material transformation of the sector to one focusing upon databases,

accounts and programming; NGO staff are concerned that their creativity is increasingly curtailed in the new climate (Henke 2007). For example, the Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre (CWCC) in Phnom Penh has over the last decade undergone external training from consultants, and internal organisational change to include a board of directors and a financial audit committee. Some staff feel that they constantly face external pressures to prioritise accountancy and audit mechanisms (and now ensure PwC conduct their external audit) or risk losing critical donor funding in an increasingly competitive climate (Sok 2007). The link with global auditors allows for powerful accountancy firms to expand their role in unparalleled ways, including the selling of advice on deregulation, privatization and self-regulation (Windsor and Warming-Rasmussen 2007: 36).

An interesting example to highlight the professionalisation of these organisations comes from the expanding microfinance sector in the country, where a combination of donor pressure and government regulation has resulted in the conversion of a majority of NGOs into professional microfinance institutions (Norman 2011). Microfinance is a poverty reduction strategy that provides small amounts of credit loans and other financial services to the poor in order to provide people with the sufficient tools to become financially autonomous and break the vicious cycle of poverty.

In Cambodia, as in many developing countries, this has become an increasingly popular form of economic empowerment, linked to the government's National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) strategy 2006–2010 where the sector has 'evolved from a series of small, isolated projects into what is arguably the most sophisticated segment of the national financial services sector' (Chou et al. 2008). In the mid-1990s, microfinance was provided by a variety of NGOs; their local knowledge and high mobility meant they were the ideal vehicle for supplying credit and various saving schemes to local poor communities. In the last decade, however, the sector has undergone a period of rapid commercialisation and expansion. This has involved a shift in NGO funding sources from top-down donor grants to market self-sustainability; significantly, it entails a professional private sector approach to poverty reduction. As they move from the margins to the centre of development assistance, Cambodian NGOs are rapidly adjusting to a new commercial environment where they can successfully upscale and expand their credit portfolios through internal organisational restructuring to shift from NGO identities into newly created shareholder-driven Microfinance Institutions (MFI). Initially, many of these NGOs went through a corporate culture shock; staff were needed that understood the business and financial side of customer service in order to prioritise market expansion and improve organisational competitiveness. As a result, the ten largest microfinance NGOs in the country have all become MFIs; often creating new internal audit, credit, and financial management information systems, human resource departments, and boards of directors in order to expand financial activities and upscale their projects to meet demand (Norman 2011).

The commercialisation of microfinance in the country highlights the complex links between civil society and the market; the pressures to mimic a private sector approach to service provision tend to leave NGOs little choice in the development marketplace. New public management inspired reform can have the potential to create a civil society sector that is more accountable, efficient, professional and fundable; reinscribing NGO identities through an instrumental neoliberal lens.

### **The new policy agenda: democratic oversight in Cambodia**

The second element of the New Policy Agenda; civil society utilised as a mechanism for democratic oversight, is also part of a powerful donor vision of Cambodia. Political decentralisation has been implemented in Cambodia since the establishment of commune councils in 2002, and more recently with the establishment of provincial and district councils in 2009, however, given the unique context of Cambodian civil society and a largely politically uneducated rural population, there is often very little upwards pressure to support these decentralisation efforts (Kim and Ojendal 2007: 4). In response, the construction of participatory spaces in development projects to help educate and 'stimulate demand' have now become a core development goal in Cambodia and a cornerstone of aid policy shortly after the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005.

Earlier models of fostering government accountability relied solely upon supply-side effects of internal government mechanisms yet the new thinking involving civil society represents a shift towards creating demand-side institutions, where NGOs and citizen participation are seen at the forefront; powerful tools of accountability (Kimchoeun et al. 2007: 28).

Social Accountability is a recent initiative to emerge from the World Bank's poverty reduction framework, considered integral to the World Bank's more inclusive approach to good governance and promoting citizen empowerment. This initiative focuses primarily on a new method of holding public officials and public servants to account through developing mechanisms that allow the direct participation of ordinary citizens as part of a broader civil society context. This form of civil society differs from the earlier donor understanding within the country, as an amalgamation of professional NGOs providing services, towards a new monitory role as described by the World Bank:

'NGOs may also need to consider a change in their current roles and, instead of substituting for weak service delivery, support efforts to manage and monitor... performance and strengthen community-level social accountability arrangements'

(World Bank 2008a: 34).



The interpretation of civil society as a participatory oversight mechanism was further strengthened under the Accra Agenda for Action (2008) to encourage new roles for civil society in the oversight of development planning, budgetary processes and service provision, eventually implemented within Cambodia under the country's Harmonisation, Alignment and Results (H-A-R) Action Plan where the RGC promised to 'deepen our engagement with civil society organisations' (CDC 2010).

In 2006 the World Bank initiated the Demand for Good Governance (DFGG) Project in Cambodia, arguably the first of its kind to focus exclusively on developing community demand side approaches to tackle governance issues in the country, connecting both state and non-state institutions (World Bank 2008b). The project is in response to what the World Bank deems low standards of governance and endemic corruption as the primary obstacles to achieving higher levels of economic and social development in the country.

Four core elements of the World Bank's DFGG project include, promoting demand of accountability of the state (and including educating and disseminating technical policy information to citizens), improving the mediation of demand (such as strengthening feedback avenues and mechanisms for closer interactions between citizens and officials), responding to demand (strengthening service delivery), and monitoring to inform demand (oversight of policy through social audits for example).

In 2007 the World Bank started work on a 'Civil Society Assessment' of Cambodia in order to establish the possibilities and pitfalls of promoting good governance through social accountability techniques, culminating in the 2009 published *Linking Citizens and the State: An Assessment of Civil Society Contributions to Good Governance in Cambodia* (World Bank 2009).

The report recognised that of the fundamental obstacles to the institutionalisation of social accountability initiatives, lack of local participation was key; projects tend to be formed by more Western orientated NGOs schooled in the technical expertise of social accountability. Indeed the Bank recognised that some of its proposals involve 'a level of technical expertise that even professional NGOs can find challenging' (World Bank 2009: 28).

Within the report, there is an implicit recognition that social accountability mechanisms are not historically situated or embedded in Khmer culture thus they need to be 'developed' or 'stimulated' through capacity building mechanisms among NGOs and various CBOs. In order to ensure that this project will be smoothly implemented, the World Bank has chosen to enact a capacity building project among CSOs through the development of a complementary programme; the Program for Enhancing the Capacity for Social Accountability (PECSA).

PECSA is an initiative launched by the World Bank and endorsed by the Cambodian ministry of interior in response to the RGC's 2004 rectangular strategy, to support the DFGG project through enhancing the capacity for



civil society to design and implement projects focusing on social accountability and good governance (PECSA 2010a). In order to stimulate demand and enhance the capacity of civil society to undertake social accountability initiatives, PECSA offers training and support to those organisations willing to introduce and adapt global accountability mechanisms to the local Cambodian context. The programme has run a variety of 'Social Accountability Schools' in Cambodia involving an intense three week training programme that is open to a variety of civil society organisations, from NGOs to media professionals and run by the Silaka training agency. In Phnom Penh, there are two key NGO training agencies that dominate the sector; Silaka and Vicheasthan Bandosbondal Neakropkrong Kangea (VBNK), both of which have had a significant impact on establishing a more professional and flexible sector to attract donor funding. Silaka has trained over 5,000 individuals from INGOs and local NGOs in Cambodia in organisational practice and capacity building, they have recently shifted the focus of their training towards good governance techniques in order to create accountability and transparency within NGOs. This includes undertaking workshops in budgetary monitoring, evaluation mechanisms, and administration skills. VBNK is a similar organisation established to provide training and consultation to other NGOs and assist in their capacity building, this includes helping them develop multiple audit systems in line with external best practices and conform to donor demands. In order for successful implementation, VBNK organise various training workshops on financial management, budget planning and monitoring, accounting systems and professional development.

Teaching material provided by both Silaka and the World Bank for the Social Accountability School demonstrates the attempt to build a technical role for civil society in the monitoring and evaluating of service provision. For example participants are taught about the key tools in the demand for social accountability such as Citizen Report Cards (CRCs); these are innovative for 'blending the "science" of surveys with the "art" of advocacy/reforms' (Nair 2008). The scientific side of data collection and analysis of service provision, is promoted as integral for implementing an efficient and objective approach to democratic oversight. The CRC is a methodological process where citizens can design and conduct surveys, analyse and interpret the results, present the findings, and establish partnerships to pressure service improvements. Indeed within this positivist framework can be found a bias towards the more neutral ideal of 'counting and discussing instead of just shouting' (Nair 2008). Social audits (of which the CRC is an example), are important tools for the social accountability framework, the teaching resources available from Silaka discuss how the shift from upwards accountability in the traditional sense was aimed at checking and verifying transactions of the state and its agencies, however, with the development of the new public management paradigm, social auditing focuses upon downwards accountability to citizens through 'compliance, quality management

and efficiency' (Silaka 2008). This external training offered is complemented by the provision of grants from PECSA for CSOs undertaking Social Accountability related projects, including a new scheme launched to create a development marketplace mechanism to adjudicate between potential beneficiaries of the available sources of funding (PECSA 2010b).

One CBO, the Phnom Srey Association for Development (PSAD) has recently undertaken Silaka training on social accountability; resulting in the construction of new advocacy tools centred on social audits (tracking commune investment funds) and Citizen Rating Reports. To enhance their funding prospects for grants on good governance initiatives they have recently hired external consultants and advisers to help negotiate funding from the World Bank (Mot 2012). Similarly, the Community Support Organisation and Development (CSOD) have also recently adopted a new professional strategy for advocacy after undertaking Silaka's Social Accountability School in 2008; new initiatives include report cards and social audits (Im 2012).

Another example comes from the Commune Council Support Project, a coalition from a number of prominent NGOs in Cambodia, which in 2004 designed a Citizens' Rating Report (CRR) to enhance the Social Accountability projects that are being undertaken in various rural regions of the country to 'promote citizen monitoring of public service delivery' (CCSP 2010). The CRR aims to document and assess basic social services, budget expenditures, administrative services, and infrastructure projects as a method of observing and holding the state to account. In the long term vision of its advocates there is a hope that it will contribute to the development of a core 'professional' group of practitioners that at the commune level can aid in the overall ideal of promoting greater levels of social accountability (CCSP 2007: 47). The CRR attempts to create a neutral mechanism that as a consequence can lead to a depoliticisation in the process of feedback and collective response. Civil society actors are being 'encouraged to create performance based mechanisms ... and performance-based evaluation systems under NPM. Citizens can participate in quality monitoring and evaluation of delivered services, improving public servants' attention to rules and performance indicators in the future' (Kimchoeun et al. 2007: 29).

Cambodia's National Poverty Reduction Strategy (NPRS) report in 2004 states that the continuing work of civil society is integral towards the monitoring of poverty reduction and urges NGOs to help prepare report cards in order to convey poverty concerns from the public. The IMF believes that NGOs are the perfect candidates for this role in the current climate, however, with more capacity building it will not be long before more localised CSOs, such as farmers' associations, will take on this monitoring role (IMF 2004: 113).

This idea links directly to the World Bank's social accountability initiative through empowering citizens to hold governments accountable for

their actions, and actively monitor what governments are doing with aid. Performance monitoring improves the level of transparency required to undermine corruption, and requires a highly technical and professional conception of civil society in order to undertake this role. The World Bank's *From Shouting to Counting* report reiterates this strategy through the advice that citizens and civil society should act professionally and in a neutral manner in order to create the collaborative institutions necessary for an accountable liberal democracy. According to a 2004 USAID report:

CSOs should conserve the energy they often expend on confrontation, and demand, in concert with donor partners, achievable but significant short-term reforms from the RGC. By involving both service-oriented and advocacy NGOs in the negotiating and monitoring process, the donors will be planting the seeds for a grand alliance designed to root out corruption at national, regional and commune levels.

(USAID 2004: 14)

CBOs and local communities have raised concerns about the way in which donors presume that Social Accountability mechanisms will take root in the country; professional NGOs are attempting to introduce these new tools and institutionalise external ideas without their consultation (Chhim 2008). The repercussions are that active members of the community joining CSOs to support various advocacy projects find themselves:

...engaged, more or less full time, in externally initiated, facilitated and funded trainings, advocacy activities and consultations. ... These tendencies on the part of donors undermine the ability of community activists networks to organize themselves, and prompt a process of gradual but inexorable NGO-ization.

(Henke 2011: 306).

Henke's research analyses the commodification of activism in Cambodia, highlighting the creation of new contracts, salaries, and external funding for NGO staff that can result in their 'de-legitimation' from activism to professional NGO staff. As a former programme manager at the Inter-church Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO), he argues that NGOs find it difficult to enact real 'social change' due to their dependence on external donors, underwritten by bureaucratic accountability structures that lock in dependency for funding (Henke 2008).

The DFGG project simply reinforces this critical dampening of civil society by focusing on CSO commentary and judgement of programme effectiveness rather than programme design. This has the effect of dampening any form of assertive struggle over development issues; recent research

carried out with CSO personnel that participated in the Silaka Social Accountability Schools suggests that CSOs are increasingly sceptical on pushing for further assertive engagement with the RGC over social accountability (Rodan and Hughes 2012: 378). CSOs themselves are often stuck in a difficult position vis-à-vis the RGC over social accountability; the RGC still tends to view the donor priority of anti-corruption with scepticism, and will actively intervene to disrupt CSOs that appear to be too 'politically assertive' in their monitoring of government performance (Rodan and Hughes 2012: 378). The RGC has even been accused of using its leverage over the \$4million available from the DFGG project to work explicitly with 'constructive NGOs' (Ngy cited in Rodan and Hughes 2012: 377).

Trade unions in Cambodia are subject to a similar level of 'dissent dampening' through the de-politicising of critical spaces for dissent and their replacement with technical/managerial structures. Hughes outlines how the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the RCG created a regulatory regime to monitor trade union–employer disputes, however, the outcome was to quell the highly politicised urban labour sector (which had previously been influential in mobilising demonstrations and protests) through feeding grievances upwards along professional and technical channels (Hughes 2007: 844).

## Conclusion

According to Hughes, the growing numbers of NGOs in Cambodia since the 1990s embody a form of instrumentality in their approach to planning projects and calculating budgets. This management approach is said to represent a preference for the professional over the political (Hughes 2003: 148). Viewed through a different lens, this discursive choice is actually highly politicised through a particular neoliberal perspective. The neoliberal framing of the political dimension as neutral, technical and professional serves to marginalise alternative discourses from emerging and recapturing the debate (Mouffe 2000).

The increasing transformation of civil society into a technocratic model to be deployed as a supporting mechanism for the efficient market and accountable state under the new policy agenda has potentially very real consequences for both the internal composition of CSOs, and their wider societal impact in the country. This is not to suggest that all CSOs in Cambodia are now technocratic entities divorced from their grassroots connections, or that new public management strategies will eradicate all forms of reflexive thinking within these organisations, merely that this trend appears to be increasing within the country, spurred on by a development orthodoxy that rewards precisely this form of professionalism as an integral cog in the synergetic state/market/civil society nexus. Donor strategies of good

governance reform of the Cambodian state have incorporated civil society into two ideal types; efficient service providers and democratic watchdogs. Service provision, as typified by the increased attention to microfinance, requires an efficient CSO that is increasingly modelled on private sector competitive models; while CSOs that participate in holding the state to account, do so through a technical and neutral strategy of professionalism that can help can implement 'development alternatives' rather than shaping broader 'alternatives to development' (Bebbington et al. 2008). Both roles reify a particular form of systemic rationality; economistic and administrative modes of coordination that prioritise efficiency, productivity, distribution, and evaluation. Societal dimensions of communicative rationality are increasingly marginalised under the new policy agenda; civil society's potential reflexivity is reduced under a coordinated synergetic model that promotes the sector as a tool to consolidate liberal market democracy and fails to respect the diversity of civil society as a development good in itself. Recent CSO initiatives in the country such as the 'Siem Reap consensus' have drawn global civil society groups together to promote the importance of CSOs as development actors in their own right, including recognising the importance of diversity and local context from these organisations (and thus to distance CSOs from technical implementation mechanisms). Although an important and ambitious proposal, much of the language is concerned with the restriction of spaces for civil society due to authoritarian legislation and regulation. One of the key concerns is the way in which the RGC is pressing ahead with a controversial Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO) aiming to regulate the registration of NGOs in the country. Concerns raised from the NGO community include the way in which the RGC would be able to arbitrarily close NGOs or block their registration. This has the potential to 'severely hamper both their projects and their advocacy efforts to promote good governance and development approaches that respect human rights' (Human Rights Watch 2011).

This is clearly important for the actual functioning of CSOs, however, prioritising the *organisational independence* of civil society from the state and the market, still neglects the core problems outlined in this article; namely the permeation of state/market (administrative/economistic) *coordination mechanisms* into civil society under good governance frameworks.

## Acknowledgements

Research for this article was supported by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The author would like to thank Julie Gilson, Caroline Hughes and the two anonymous referees of *The Pacific Review*, for their helpful advice and comments.

## Notes

1. Edwards and Hulme argue that of the two roles for civil society under the New Policy Agenda, it is (political) democratic oversight that is linked to good governance reform, however, I argue in this article that both the political and economic dimensions can be conceptualised as part of the good governance framework, due to a new focus on professionalism and efficiency within the governance of NGO-based (economic) service provision (Edwards and Hulme 1996a)
2. Cambodia is sometimes referred to as a 'hybrid democracy' containing the formal institutions of a liberal democratic state but failing to comply to the norms values and procedures of a democracy (Kim and Ojendal 2009: 102).
3. Habermas outlined three key modes of social coordination; communicative, administrative and economic, the first tends to be linked to the reflexive coordination mechanisms associated with civil society, whilst the latter two modes are linked to a particular instrumental form of rationality that is associated with systems of governance (Habermas 1994).
4. Although the umbrella term CSO is increasingly common, many donor institutions such as the World Bank will differentiate between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community building organisations (CBOs). NGOs are often seen as serving a wider variety of individuals, with generally a more formal structure, while CBOs are less formally organised and tied directly to the community from which they emerge (Gibbs et al; 1999).
5. Prior to the Paris Peace Accords, the Cambodian people had endured one of the most ruthlessly brutal political systems in modern history under the Khmer Rouge (1975–79) leading to the eventual intervention by Vietnamese forces to establish the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–91).
6. The usage of the term donor community within Cambodia represents the bilateral donors: Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Republic of Korea, Russia, Thailand, UK, and the US, as well as the multilateral institutions of the World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and a variety of UN agencies. These external development partners make up the influential 'Consultative Group' (CG) and the Government Donor Coordination Committee (GDCC) to harmonise and improve aid strategy between the government and donors.
7. Although this is generally attributed to a particular donor perspective of the country, the government also recognised that this period represents 'starting from ground zero' (RGC 2006).
8. Interestingly, the original NGO-GPP acronym stood for NGO Good Practice Project up until 2011; its transition serves to reinforce the argument about an increasingly professional interpretation of accountability mechanisms.
9. In particular, the RGC in its updated 2008 Rectangular Strategy and NSDP 2009–2013 emphasises the importance of working with those NGOs and associations that operate according to the principles of Good Governance (RGC 2011).

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